

Romans 9:(1-7)8, 30-33 - 11th after Pentecost [31.7.2016]

God's people - not by genetics but by grace!

[¹ With Christ as my witness, I speak with utter truthfulness. My conscience and the Holy Spirit confirm it. ² My heart is filled with bitter sorrow and unending grief ³ for my people, my Jewish brothers and sisters. I would be willing to be forever cursed — cut off from Christ! — if that would save them. ⁴ They are the people of Israel, chosen to be God's adopted children. God revealed his glory to them. He made covenants with them and gave them his law. He gave them the privilege of worshipping him and receiving his wonderful promises. ⁵ Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are their ancestors, and Christ himself was an Israelite as far as his human nature is concerned. And he is God, the one who rules over everything and is worthy of eternal praise! Amen.

⁶ Well then, has God failed to fulfill his promise to Israel? No, for not all who are born into the nation of Israel are truly members of God's people! ⁷ Being descendants of Abraham doesn't make them truly Abraham's children. For the Scriptures say, "Isaac is the son through whom your descendants will be counted," though Abraham had other children, too.] ⁸ This means that Abraham's physical descendants are not necessarily children of God. Only the children of the promise are considered to be Abraham's children.

³⁰ What does all this mean? Even though the Gentiles were not trying to follow God's standards, they were made right with God. And it was by faith that this took place. ³¹ But the people of Israel, who tried so hard to get right with God by keeping the law, never succeeded. ³² Why not? Because they were trying to get right with God by keeping the law instead of by trusting in him. They stumbled over the great rock in their path. ³³ God warned them of this in the Scriptures when he said, "I am placing a stone in Jerusalem that makes people stumble, a rock that makes them fall. But anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced." [NLT]

Normally when a company wants to start a new project, feasibility studies are carried out to ascertain whether the people where this project is to be launched are receptive to the product. It is obviously much too expensive to start on a new project, if there is not a good prospect of it succeeding, and hopefully soon bringing in profit.

Doing research, checking how well it will be received - that is not the way in which the church has done its mission projects, however. The mission of bringing the message of Christ's saving grace into a world has driven people in response to God's call in their lives to go out to people they often did not

know much about, so that they would receive new life in Christ. It was not a case of: are they like we are? Do they deserve it? Are they worthy?

In this part of his Letter to the Romans Paul struggles with the fact that so many of Jewish origin did not accept Jesus as their Messiah. In spite of their long history as the people of God - in spite of being the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in spite of the fact that according to his human nature Jesus was also a Jew, so many of the Jews did not, and do not to this day, accept what God offered them.

There are still people who claim that the Jews are God's chosen people - no matter what they believe. Yet, Paul makes it clear here that we all have become part of

God's people - not by genetics but by grace!

It is God's grace that we are here today, hearing his Word, and receiving his forgiveness. It is his grace by which we belong to the church of Christ, and are called Christians. In his grace God sent out those who were willing to follow his prompting to carry the message of Jesus Christ to people of different language and culture.

There have always been voices which have questioned whether mission work - taking the Gospel to people of different culture in different countries - is the right way of doing things. Should one not rather concentrate on one's own people - where you know the culture and the language. Yet, since the beginning God has sent his messengers to **Gentiles [heathens, who] were not trying to follow God's standards**. He has sent them out to those who had not heard of him, or had looked for him.

Mission may often look haphazard to those who are used to applying business methods of achieving success - of carefully weighing up the options, before taking the plunge to start with a new undertaking. God's way has been to send people where he wants them to go - it has been his way to send fallible humans out, and in spite of all our failings his Word which was spoken has had a great response.

It should not surprise us that many of those who initially accept the message are those Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians (1:26-29) are not members of the elite - are not the powerbrokers, because they are willing to accept the news that they belong somewhere - and not just anywhere: they are people of the God who made everything!

We are not here today because of what we have to offer God, but because of what he offers us. Like those early Christians we too hear the news with wonder that we are his people - in spite of our history, in spite of anything we did or did not do, God calls us and gives us a new identity and a sense of belonging.

You may know the expression that God does not have grandchildren - only children. We all, in spite of a long history of our ancestors being members of the church, are first generation children of God. Each one of us is here because of God's call to you and me. We belong here, because of faith in God - because we trust his promise that in Jesus Christ everything that separates us from him has been removed.

God has no grandchildren - it is not our genetics which give us a place amongst God's people. As was the case with Paul this has caused many to be **filled with bitter sorrow and unending grief for [our] people**. This sorrow is a result of the fact that so many no longer heed God's call - in the countries which sent out missionaries to Africa churches stand empty. But not only there, it may happen to our friends and even in our families as well that the Gospel message no longer received with thankful hearts.

The grief which Paul expresses here - the grief we may feel when people close to us turn away from the church of Christ -, is most certainly also a grief that God experiences. After all, we know that God wants all people to be saved and to know the truth of his message that through Jesus Christ it does not matter who you are or what you have done, you may belong to his people (1 Timothy 2:4)..

God has done something quite extraordinary for all of us. He did not wait for

us to be right before he came to us - he came to us so that we may now be made right. God did not ask how much we would be worth to him, but through him we have been given a new worth. Thank God for his grace, by which we are now the people of God.